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SUBJECT: ENGAGING SARKOZY'S GOVERNMENT ON THE MIDDLE EAST

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Further to the recommendations made reftel on
engaging President Sarkozy's government on a number of key
foreign policy issues (including Iraq and Iran), this cable
provides additional thoughts on how we might strengthen our
partnership with France on the broad range of our mutual
interests in the Middle East in the coming weeks.
Specifically, we recommend:

- Agreeing on a common approach to Lebanon's presidential
elections;
- Letting Sarkozy drive the anticipated change in France's
approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In pursuing these objectives, we would also advise engaging
with Sarkozy on his idea of a Mediterranean Union. While
this is not an urgent priority in and of itself, it might
provide useful cover as we begin a dialogue on more sensitive
issues. End summary.

Lebanon

12. (C) Sarkozy's meeting last week with Lebanese majority
leader Saad Hariri helped solidify expectations that Sarkozy
will provide continuity on France's Lebanon policy in the
short term, including by supporting the creation of the
Special Tribunal through a Chapter VII UNSCR. According to
Basile Yared, Hariri's representative in Paris, Chirac
extracted a personal promise from Sarkozy on this point even
before the meeting with Hariri.

13. (C) Looking beyond Chapter VII, the future of French
policy in Lebanon becomes somewhat cloudier. Sarkozy has no
love for Hizballah, and has been blunt about the need for
Hizballah to disarm. However, this is not to say that
Sarkozy is prepared to rush in where Chirac feared to tread.
Sarkozy has been cagey on whether he'll push for an EU
designation of Hizballah as a terrorist entity, indicating
that such a decision would be based on the totality of French
interests (including, undoubtedly, the potential
repercussions on French peacekeepers in Lebanon). By the
same token, we expect that Sarkozy would cock a skeptical
eyebrow at any suggestion that UNIFIL increase the tempo and
intensity of its operations: he will not want to jeopardize
his political capital -- which he needs to get his domestic
reform package enacted -- by getting UNIFIL involved in
kinetic operations.

14. (C) In addition, in their internal discussions during the

opening weeks of the Sarkozy administration, France's foreign policy elite (including some career diplomats at the Quai d'Orsay) will be pushing the following arguments, with varying degrees of intensity:

- The intimate alliance between Chirac and the Hariris was an embarrassment; France needs to take a less personalized approach to Lebanon;
- There is no security-driven solution (e.g., tighter enforcement of the arms embargo) to Lebanon's political crisis -- a political solution is needed;
- France needs to take a more neutral approach to Lebanon's internal politics (i.e., less overt support for March 14);
- France should reaffirm its support for Lebanon's Maronite community (its traditional Lebanese client), which will inevitably entail reaching an accommodation with Michel Aoun;
- France should explore a high-level dialogue with Syria;
- France needs to keep a door open to improved relations with Iran/Hizballah.

15. (C) Our goal should be to prevent such arguments from taking root with Sarkozy's team. The changing of the guard at the Quai may help. In any event, as we begin interacting with the Sarkozy government at all levels and through all of our traditional channels (as well as any new ones which may present themselves), we suggest sequencing a series of messages to provide the structure for a fruitful dialogue on Lebanon. Our first message could simply underscore our deep appreciation for our excellent cooperation with France on Chapter VII and express our desire to continue working together closely. Once we have Chapter VII in our pocket, we could initiate a conversation on the way forward, beginning with an agreed approach to Lebanon's presidential election. Given the sensitive optics (the French would likely be

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horrified by any proposal that might give the appearance of the U.S. and France backing a particular candidate), discretion will be essential. Once we have an agreed approach to the presidential elections, we should revisit enforcement of the arms embargo/disarmament of Hizballah.

Israeli-Palestinian Relations

16. (C) Sarkozy's Jewish heritage and affinity for the State of Israel are well-known, and became campaign issues for Jewish as well as Arab and Muslim voters (although not for the broader electorate). As anticipated, his victory was greeted enthusiastically by Israel, rather tepidly by the Arab states, and venomously by Islamic extremists. It will not be lost on these quarters that Bernard Kouchner is the first Jewish foreign minister in the history of the Fifth Republic, and moreover, one who at the outset supported U.S. intervention in Iraq. Yet the conventional wisdom at the MFA is that so far as French policy in the Middle East is concerned, the impact of Sarkozy's election has been overrated by most observers. According to this narrative, which we've heard from several well-placed interlocutors, Sarkozy will likely make a symbolic gesture to ostentatiously signal his break with France's unabashedly pro-Arab policy. He may also argue that this will increase France's and the EU's leverage in the Middle East peace process. However, as the narrative also goes, in the aftermath of this gesture he will be at pains to reassure the Arab states of France's goodwill, and the resultant combination of diplomatic necessity, bureaucratic inertia (one veteran Arabist at the Quai told us that "France has a certain Arab policy that is much more important than Mr. Sarkozy and his government"), French commercial interests, and the weight of French elite and public opinion (which remains overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Palestinians) will prevent his new approach from achieving critical velocity. Together, they will slowly but ineluctably pull French policy back to its traditional, pro-Arab center of gravity.

17. (C) While this is certainly possible, our own view is that it is not inevitable. We neither assume that Sarkozy will be content with superficial policy changes, nor doubt his ability to impose his will upon the MFA. To the contrary, we believe there is a real possibility that Sarkozy will try to lead public opinion toward a more fair-minded approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This will not happen overnight (we're talking about the French foreign policy equivalent of plate tectonics), but even a small shift in the intellectual bedrock will have seismic consequences.

Approaching the French

18. (C) If Sarkozy is to succeed, he must be seen as the driving force behind the new policy approach; he cannot appear to be acting under U.S. pressure. We can make his job easier by demonstrating that France's input is valued, and that Sarkozy's views are met with respect in Washington. One option would be to invite the French to brief us, at an early date, on Sarkozy's vision for a Mediterranean Union, a proposal aimed at addressing the inadequacies of the Euro-Med dialogue and the Barcelona process. While we see the Mediterranean Union proposal largely as a dodge for avoiding Turkey's inclusion in the EU, it clearly goes beyond that: Sarkozy envisions a vehicle for regulating migration, protecting the environment, and driving economic development.

He apparently sees it as an alternative forum for approaching problems such as Israel's relations with its neighbors and the lack of integration in North Africa (although some have suggested that his proposal has no chance of success until Moroccan-Algerian relations improve through a resolution of the Western Sahara conflict). Inviting the French to explain the proposal in greater depth would provide clarity on Sarkozy's thinking, while providing the new government with some political cover as it engages with us on a range of sensitive issues including Lebanon and Israeli-Palestinian relations.

19. (C) Alternatively, we could consider engaging Sarkozy's government in a strategic (but not necessarily formal) dialogue on the Middle East. The prospects for such a dialogue should become clearer as Sarkozy's foreign policy team takes shape over the next few weeks.

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